

◀ This page from an illuminated manuscript shows a typical day on a feudal manor.

The Development of Feudalism in Western Europe

2.1 Introduction

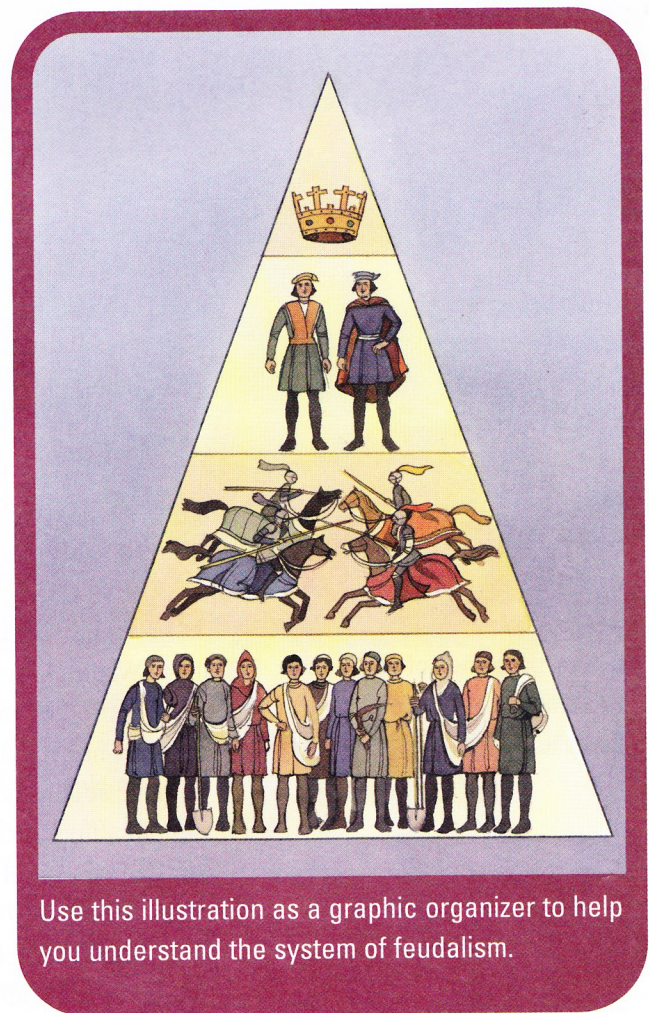
In the last chapter, you learned about the rich legacy of the Roman Empire. The fall of the Roman Empire in 476 C.E. marks the beginning of the Middle Ages. In this chapter, you will learn about the system of **feudalism** that developed in Europe during the Middle Ages.

Recall that historians divide the Middle Ages into three periods. The Early Middle Ages lasted from about 476 to 1000 C.E. The High Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1300. The Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1300 to 1450.

The Early Middle Ages began with the fall of Rome. The Roman Empire had unified much of Europe for about 500 years. After the empire collapsed, life was dangerous and difficult in western Europe. People worked hard simply to survive and to have enough to eat. They also needed to protect themselves from conquest by invading barbarians and nearby kingdoms.

These challenges gave rise to the economic and political system historians call *feudalism*. In the feudal system, people pledged loyalty to a **lord**—a ruler or a powerful landholder. In return, they received protection from the lord. **Knights**, or armed warriors, fought on behalf of their lords. **Peasants** worked the land. At the bottom of the system were serfs, peasants who were not free to leave the lord's land.

In this chapter, you will learn more about the difficulties people faced during the Early Middle Ages. Then you will learn about the rise of feudalism. Finally, you will explore what daily life was like for people living under feudalism.





In 800 C.E., Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman emperor by Pope Leo III.

barbarian a person belonging to a tribe or group that is considered uncivilized

Christianity the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ

Roman Catholic Church the Christian church headed by the pope in Rome

pope the bishop of Rome and supreme leader of the Roman Catholic Church

2.2 Western Europe During the Middle Ages

For 500 years, much of Europe was part of the Roman Empire. The rest of the continent was controlled by groups of people that the Romans called **barbarians**. When Rome fell to invading barbarians in 476 C.E., Europe was left with no central government or system of defense. Many invading groups set up kingdoms throughout western Europe. These kingdoms were often at war with one another. The most powerful rulers were those who controlled the most land and had the best warriors.

Charlemagne's Empire One powerful group during this time was the Franks (from whom modern-day France takes its name). The Franks were successful because they had developed a new style of warfare. It depended on troops of

knights, heavily armed warriors who fought on horseback. To get and hold power, a ruler needed the services and loyalty of many knights. In return for their loyalty and service, the ruler rewarded knights with land and privileges.

One of the early leaders of the Franks was an ambitious young warrior named Clovis. In 481 C.E., at the age of 15, Clovis became king of the Franks. Five years later, he defeated the last great Roman army in Gaul. During his 30-year reign, he led the Franks in wars that widened the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom.

Clovis also helped lead the Franks into **Christianity**. Clovis married a Christian woman, Clotilda, and eventually was baptized into the **Roman Catholic Church**. Many of his followers became Christians as well.

The most important leader of the Franks was Charlemagne (Charles the Great). This impressive king ruled for over 40 years, from 768 to 814. Writings from that period say that he was six feet four inches tall—extremely tall for his time—and “always stately and dignified.” Legend has it that he read very little and couldn’t write, yet he loved to have scholarly works read to him. He encouraged education and scholarship, making his court a center of culture. Most important, he unified nearly all the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire. One of the poets at his court called him the “King Father of Europe.”

Charlemagne built his empire with the help of a **pope**—Leo III, the leader of the Catholic Church in Rome. As you will learn in the next

chapter, the church was a central part of society during this time. For Charlemagne, the blessing of the church sent the message “God is on my side.” For his part, Leo needed the support of someone with an army. In return for Charlemagne’s help, the pope crowned him Holy Roman emperor in 800 C.E.

Charlemagne’s empire survived many barbarian attacks. After his death in 814, however, it quickly fell apart. The weak rulers who followed him could not defend the empire against new waves of invasions. Still, these kings helped prepare the way for feudalism by following Charlemagne’s example of rewarding knights with land and privileges in return for military service.

A Need for Order and Protection In the 9th and 10th centuries, western Europe was threatened by three main groups. Muslims, or followers of the religion of Islam, advanced from the Near East and northern Africa into what is now Spain. Magyars, a central Asian people, pressed in from the east. And Vikings swept down from present-day Norway and Denmark.

The Vikings were fierce warriors who struck fear into the people of Europe. At times their intent was to set up colonies. But they were best known for their terrifying raids on towns and villages.

Imagine a Viking attack. The people of the village are at early morning church services when an alarm bell starts to peal. Vikings! Long, shallow wooden boats have brought the Vikings close to shore. Now they leave their boats and run toward the town with swords and axes raised over their heads. People are running in all directions. Several villagers who try to resist are killed. Others are seized by the Viking raiders and taken back to the ships.

Clearly, the people of western Europe needed ways to defend themselves. To protect themselves and their property, they gradually developed the system we call *feudalism*. Let’s find out how it worked.



A fleet of Viking ships attacked the walled city of Paris in 885 C.E.



Knights fought on foot and horseback to defend their king's castle and land.

monarch a ruler, such as a king or queen

fief land granted by a lord to a vassal in exchange for loyalty and service

manor a large estate, including farmland and villages, held by a lord

2.3 Feudalism: Establishing Order

By the High Middle Ages (about 1000 C.E.), Europeans had developed the system of feudalism. The feudal system provided people with protection and safety by establishing a stable social order.

Under this system, people were bound to one another by promises of loyalty. In theory, all the land in the kingdom belonged to the **monarch** (usually a king but sometimes a queen). A great deal of land was also owned by the church. The king kept some land for himself and gave **fiefs**, or grants of land, to his most important lords, who became his vassals. In return, each lord promised to supply the king with knights in times of war. A lord then enlisted lesser lords and knights as *his* vassals. Often these arrangements were written down. Many of these contracts survive to this day in museums.

At the bottom of the social system were peasants. Lords rented some of their land to peasants who worked for them. Some peasants, called *serfs*, were “tied” to the land they worked. They could not leave the lord's land, and they had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of land of their own.

Most lords and wealthier knights lived on **manors**, or large estates. A manor included a castle or manor house, one or more villages, and the surrounding farmland. Manors were in the country, far from towns. That meant the peasants had to produce everything the people on the manor needed. Only a few goods came from outside the manor, such as salt for preserving meat, and iron for making tools.

During the Middle Ages, people were born into a social class for life. They had the same social position, and often the same job, as their parents. Let's take a closer look at the classes in feudal society.